

8. On Participating in Worship

Worshipping God With Our Bodies

Orthodoxy has a robust theology of the body. We understand the human body to reflect the image of God, so what we do with our bodies matters. Thus, dressing in a respectful and modest way for worship is an affirmation that our bodies are made by God to be holy, and to reflect Him. This is also why we give attention to what we do with our bodies during worship.

In particular, newcomers will notice that Orthodox worship involves a lot of standing! The idea is that standing is the most attentive posture; we stand prepared and ready to engage. We are not passive spectators of services, but active participants in the worship. Thus we glorify God with our bodies first of all by standing and holding our attention towards God. There are times when it is appropriate to sit; when in doubt follow the majority of the worshippers present. Nevertheless, it is to be expected that those who are elderly or infirm will sit more frequently than others; some are physically unable to stand for long and in that case they should feel free to sit as needed.

Worshippers also frequently making the sign of the cross (touching forehead, chest or abdomen, right shoulder, then left). We make the cross with the right hand, which symbolizes strength in Biblical and traditional Christian contexts (e.g. “Thy right hand, O Lord, is glorified in strength” — Exod. 15:6). The hand is held with the thumb and first two fingers brought together; these three represent the Holy Trinity; the two remaining fingers which are folded against the palm represent the two natures of Christ (both God and Man). We especially cross ourselves at the Name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We also often combine the cross with a bow from the waist (called a “metania”) and sometimes prostrate (bow the whole body down to the ground) or kneel, most frequently during the season of Lent. When we approach an icon, blessing cross, the Gospel book, or other holy object we “venerate” it. Typically this involves making the cross three times with a “metania” each time: twice before, then kissing the icon or other sacred object, and then making a third cross and metania. In general, if you are new to Orthodox worship, you might observe what those around you do, and do likewise.

The Holy Mysteries

Holy Communion and other Mysteries (Sacraments) of the Church are for baptized Orthodox Christians. Just as the intimacy of marriage is traditionally understood to be reserved for those who have made solemn vows beforehand, the Holy Mysteries are the consummation and sign of commitment to a faith and life in unity with the whole Orthodox Church. All are invited to attend services, to learn, and to make the choice to enter the Catechumenate (period of learning and preparation before becoming full members of the Church). The God-given order for participating in the Sacraments begins with Baptism, followed by Chrismation, and the reception of the Eucharist (Communion) and other Mysteries as appropriate. Aside from the Holy Mysteries, however, those who are visitors or inquirers may feel free to participate in worship with us as they discover the Orthodox Faith.